

Central Intelligence Agency

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CHINA AT THE UN: BEIJING AND THE DISARMAMENT ISSUE

SUMMARY

China will use its independent stand on arms control issues to clearly distinguish itself from the superpowers and curry favor with a broad Third World constituency during the UN Second Special Session on Disarmament (SSOD). Foreign Minister Huang Hua and the Chinese delegation are certain to question the sincerity and value of Soviet and US proposals for nuclear weapon reductions. In reiterating their critique of strategic arms negotiations, the Chinese will portray themselves as champions of the Third World's efforts to alter the superpowers' dominance over the control of nuclear weapons.

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Beijing, however, remains basically uneasy about the disarmament issue. The Chinese view US arms control policy as an important indicator of Washington's intentions toward Moscow. They are highly skeptical about the value of disarmament negotiations and worry that accommodating Moscow in any new arms control agreements could bring other changes in the US

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relationship with the USSR and, in turn, alter the US-China tie. In short, Beijing will do nothing to encourage progress during US-Soviet talks on disarmament.

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China's Disarmament Policy

Chinese views on disarmament have changed little since the mid-1960's. Like their position at the inaugural SSOD in 1978, the Chinese officials this year have said they will support "genuine" disarmament, including simultaneous reductions in conventional and nuclear weapons. Beijing will call on the US and USSR to begin the disarmament process while reserving the right for China and all other countries to arm in self-defense against the superpowers.

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The Chinese have used these principles and their own public pledge of non-first use of nuclear weapons to justify a persistent unwillingness to participate in arms control negotiations. In general, the Chinese media and, in private, Foreign Ministry officials have characterized these negotiations as efforts to ensure US and Soviet nuclear superiority--over each other and the world--and they have taken a similar tack on recent initiatives. In addressing the current US and Soviet postures, for example, Beijing has called the behavior of both Washington and Moscow "hegemonist". China's interests, of course, are well served by its aloofness from arms talks, because Beijing can criticize the superpowers' arsenals while continuing the development of its own nuclear program.

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Playing to the Third World

The Chinese see the SSOD this year as an ideal forum to publicize their renewed attention to the Third World, where China's foreign policy has displayed a closer identification with the political, economic and military interests among developing countries. China appears unlikely to take the lead on pending proposals during the special session, but it may well be more active in endorsing and promoting Third World positions on disarmament.

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The Chinese may try to capitalize on their somewhat higher profile on disarmament issues in the past few years. Since 1980, China has backed various arms control resolutions in the UN Conference on Disarmament--an international forum that does not focus primarily on the US-Soviet nuclear balance--and it can presumably publicize Chinese activities there on behalf of Third World interests. The Chinese may also point to their more recent public support for the anti-nuclear and peace movements in Western Europe and the US.

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There is, however, no evidence that China has a well-developed or sophisticated view of alternative arms control strategies. Although officials in Beijing are probably genuinely concerned about the dangers of an arms race and nuclear

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proliferation, they continue to insist publicly that "medium and small" countries have the right to maintain whatever defense forces they deem necessary--an implicit support to Third World governments interested in possessing a nuclear capability.

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Concern for the US and USSR

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China's position on arms control also reflects Beijing's basic concerns about its position in the US-Soviet-China triangle. Most obviously, the Chinese want to prevent a US-Soviet bilateral agreement that could result in increasing the Soviet strategic threat against China. At the same time, they are wary of talks that might seek to draw China into such negotiations--the Soviets have argued that any nuclear limitation talks should include Britain, France, and China--because of the desire to insulate Beijing's own nuclear development program from any external limitations.

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Most important, the Chinese regard the disarmament issue as a potential bellwether of US-Soviet relations. Given the crucial role assigned the US in opposing the USSR by Chinese strategy, Beijing, at a minimum, is likely to view a more forthcoming US attitude on arms talks as a move that tacitly encourages US allies and others to reach an accommodation with Moscow. China's concern is already evident in its statements regarding recent US and Soviet proposals for strategic talks.

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Beijing's public portrayal of the need to maintain a solid international front and strong defenses is likely to become more prominent as the give-and-take on a format for arms negotiations proceeds. The Chinese recently asked their US counterparts in Beijing about press reports that US policy toward the USSR may change and about the possibility of separate US-Soviet discussions at the SSOD to convey such official concern. In the final analysis, Beijing will assess any movement toward new strategic arms talks in terms of both US resolve to sustain its position vis-a-vis Soviet military capabilities and Washington's continued willingness to accommodate China's strategic interest.

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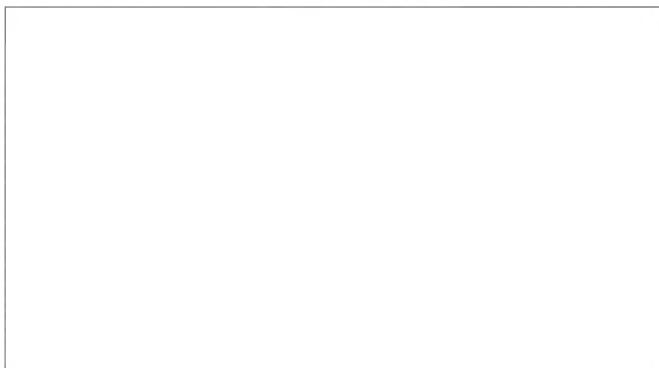
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